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Dispersal and Direct Provision: a case study

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Abstract

The policy of dispersing asylum seekers around the country and housing them in direct provision accommodation centres was introduced almost two decades ago. This article looks at why the government decided to introduce this policy and outlines how it was implemented. The media coverage and the political discourse around the subject of asylum seekers at the time will be looked at briefly to show the context in which these measures were introduced. The article then looks at the village of Clogheen in Co. Tipperary (population 400) and the town of Tralee in Co. Kerry (population 19,000) to see how the dispersal programme worked on the ground when it was first introduced. An analysis of the problems that arose at the introduction of this policy, as illustrated in these two case studies, is carried out, and it is argued that many of these problems remain today, largely as a result of the way in which the Irish authorities have managed the dispersal of asylum seekers and their accommodation in direct provision centres.

Keywords: Asylum seekers; Political refugees; Dispersal; Direct Provision; Public opinion; Republic of Ireland

Introduction

There was a rise in the number of asylum seekers all over Europe from the early 1990s onwards, following the fall of the Berlin wall, and as a result of the war in the Balkans and the numerous interethnic conflicts in Africa. However, the effects of these upheavals were not felt in Ireland until a tightening of refugee and immigration legislation in the United Kingdom, France and Spain drove people seeking international protection to other European countries. In the early 1990s, the number of applications for asylum in Ireland had been extremely low, with 39 in 1992, 91 in 1993 and 362 in 1994. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, the number of people coming to Ireland to seek asylum rose dramatically. In 1996, it stood at 1,179, more than trebled the following year (3,883), and increased in 1999 to 7,724. In 2000, 10,938 new applications were lodged.¹

¹ Statistics from 1990 onwards for the number of applications year by year are published in the UNHCR statistical yearbooks, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistical-yearbooks.html>. Statistics from 2001 onwards are available on the website of the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner at <http://www.orac.ie/website/orac/oracwebsite.nsf/page/orac-stats-en>.

Until the beginning of 2000, asylum seekers were put into emergency accommodation (paid for by the local Regional Health Board) for the first two months and given the standard weekly Supplementary Welfare allowance.² After this initial period, they had to move out to their own accommodation and wait until a decision was made on their application – which could take between six months and several years. At that time, 90 percent of these people stayed in Dublin where all asylum applications are processed and where there is easier access to the many services required to ensure a successful application (lawyers, interpreters, support groups, etc.), as well as access to the networks of the various ethnic communities.

By late 1999, however, housing had become increasingly expensive and difficult to find in Dublin, and the Eastern Health Board³ could not guarantee accommodation to the 800–1,000 new asylum seekers who were arriving every month. It was decided henceforth to disperse all new arrivals to other locations around the country and to introduce what came to be known as ‘direct provision’ – asylum seekers would be put into accommodation with full board and would therefore no longer receive normal Supplementary Welfare allowances, but instead get a weekly cash allowance of £15 per adult and £7.50 per child.⁴ The decision to move away from a system in which asylum seekers had access to social welfare payments to a quasi-cashless system was partly due to the fact that a similar policy had been introduced in the UK. The Irish government was concerned that Ireland might be perceived as a more favourable destination and consequently attract increasing numbers of asylum seekers if its system was not aligned with that of the UK.

A year later, by early February 2001, some 4,000 asylum seekers were accommodated in 70 centres around the country under this mandatory dispersal programme. This article outlines why the government decided to introduce this policy and describes how it was implemented. First, the media coverage and the political discourse around the subject of asylum seekers at the time will be looked at briefly to show the context in which these measures were introduced. Then two case studies will be analysed, focusing on the village of Clogheen in Co. Tipperary (population 400) and on the town of Tralee in Co. Kerry (population 19,000) to see how the dispersal programme worked on the ground when it was first introduced. Clogheen drew much attention from the media in 2000 because of the angry reaction of its inhabitants to the pending arrival of asylum seekers in their midst. It was representative of what was taking place in many villages around the country. Tralee, on the other hand, had already hosted 87 Kosovar refugees in 1999, and it is therefore interesting to compare their reception with that of the asylum seekers very shortly afterwards. The two case studies highlight the problems that arose at the introduction of this policy, many of which remain today, largely as a result of the manner in which the Irish authorities have managed the dispersal of asylum seekers and their accommodation in direct provision centres.

The organisation of dispersal

From late October 1999, advertisements were placed in national and local newspapers by the Department of the Environment asking people to come forward with any accommodation that

² In June 2000, this allowance was £72 per adult, £115.20 per couple and £13.20 per child (Source: Department of Social, Family and Community Affairs, July 2000).

³ The Eastern Health Board has since been renamed the Eastern Regional Health Authority.

⁴ With the introduction of the euro in 2002, this became €19.10 per adult and €9.50 per child. Despite calls from many NGOs over the years for an increase in this allowance, the amount remained unchanged for years. A report into the direct provision system published in 2015, the McMahon Report, recommended significant increases to both the adults’ and children’s rates. In 2016, the children’s weekly allowance was increased to €15.60, and in the summer of 2017, the allowances for both adults and children rose to €21.60, still largely insufficient according to NGOs. The budget for 2019 has incorporated the increases recommended in the McMahon Report, so that adults will receive €38.80 and children €29.80 per week.

could be deemed suitable for asylum seekers. In the early months of 2000, hotels, guesthouses and other accommodation centres were bought or leased by the State in towns and villages around the country. The Directorate of Asylum Support Services (DASS), part of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, negotiated directly and discreetly with the owners or leasees of these centres for the provision of full-board accommodation.⁵

The arrival of the asylum seekers to these places was simply announced a few days beforehand. There was little or no previous consultation with public service providers – schools, doctors, Community Welfare Officers (CWO) – nor with the local population. This lack of preparation on the ground not only resulted in the specific needs of asylum seekers being unmet from the start, but also served to heighten local concerns and distrust.

In most cases, less than a week before the scheduled arrival of the asylum seekers, public meetings were organised where the local population could meet civil servants from the Directorate who travelled from Dublin. Many of these meetings made national headlines because of the anger and hostility expressed at them. The feelings voiced showed the ignorance of the issues at stake and the insularity still prevalent in some parts of Ireland. Many people, including local politicians, spoke openly of fears that asylum seekers would bring diseases like AIDS, TB and hepatitis into the community. They were worried that crime rates would rise, that begging would increase on the streets, and that local women and children would not be safe. They were also concerned that property prices would slump as a result of the arrival of asylum seekers and that tourism would be badly affected.⁶

These xenophobic sentiments had been fuelled in part by a significant section of the press – mostly the sensationalist tabloid newspapers like the *Irish Star* and the *Irish Sun*, but also the Independent Group's publications, *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent* and *Evening Herald*, which together represented the vast majority of total newspaper sales in Ireland.⁷ Since 1997, a series of stories had been published in these newspapers making exaggerated claims about 'bogus' refugees flooding into the State to beg and thief⁸ (and even

⁵ The privatization of accommodation centres for asylum seekers continues today and has been a very lucrative activity for the companies who own them or manage them on behalf of the State. See Colin Murphy, 'The Asylum Millionaires', *Village Magazine*, 18–24 May 2006, pp.10–12. See also Carl O'Brien, 'How direct provision became a profitable business', *Irish Times*, 9 December 2014. These articles describe how many of these companies, in order to avoid having to publish their accounts, have registered as unlimited companies or have their parent companies in off-shore jurisdictions. To increase profit margins, costs are cut, and as a result, conditions in the centres are often appalling. As the many reports on direct provision centres to date have documented, meals are often substandard, rooms damp and in a state of disrepair and common facilities very basic. Some examples of these reports are, in chronological order: Comhlámh, *Refugee Lives: the failure of direct provision as a social response to the needs of asylum seekers in Ireland* (2001); Free Legal Advice Centre (FLAC), *Direct Discrimination? An analysis of the scheme of Direct Provision in Ireland* (2003); Children's Rights Alliance & Integrating Ireland, *Children and Families living in Direct Provision* (2009); FLAC, *One size doesn't fit all: a legal analysis of the Direct Provision and dispersal system in Ireland 10 years on* (2009); E. Quinn, Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, *Lives on Hold: Living Long-Term in Direct Provision Accommodation* (2013).

⁶ For example, Maria Pepper, 'Rosslare residents angry over hotel refugee centre', *Irish Times*, 7 April 2000; Chris Dooley, 'South-East reacts angrily to prospect of a sudden influx of asylum seekers', *Irish Times*, 8 April 2000; Anne Lucey, 'Locals criticise lack of notice on asylum issue', *Irish Times*, 21 April 2000.

⁷ On this subject, see Andy Pollack, 'An invitation to racism? Irish daily newspaper coverage of the refugee issue' in D. Kiberd (ed.), *Media in Ireland: the search for Ethical Journalism*, Open Air, 1999. Also, Paul Cullen, *Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), pp. 37–42.

⁸ For example, 'Floodgates as new army of poor swamp the country', *Sunday World*, 25 May 1997; 'Dublin now main target for gangs trafficking in people' and 'Shopkeepers say theft by Romanians is snowballing', *Irish Times*, 26 May 1997.

to rape⁹), defraud the welfare system,¹⁰ give birth to their babies in Irish hospitals¹¹ and swell housing lists at huge cost to the taxpayer. These alarmist reports contributed significantly to the fears of many people, which often then translated into outright hostility whenever plans to house asylum seekers were announced in different locations around the country.

A European study of media coverage of racism and cultural diversity concluded that:

(a) common feature for all countries facing new immigration is the stereotypical language used, in particular the metaphors comparing arrivals of asylum seekers to a natural disaster and military invasions in headlines to represent immigration as a major threat.¹²

In the section of the report about Ireland, the authors noted that in the period when the number of asylum seekers started to increase,

(t)he media began to develop a common vocabulary for issues related to racism and ethnic minorities. It was generally negative in tone and usually based on the volume, such as refugees flooding Ireland, waves of immigrants and armies of the poor. According to the mainstream media, in 1997–1998, Ireland was being swamped, invaded and conned on an almost daily basis.¹³

The journalist Andy Pollak considered that the treatment of the question of asylum seekers in certain Irish newspapers “[...] did a considerable amount to change the benign, if ignorant, attitude of most Irish people to refugees into something much more volatile and potentially dangerous in the short space of less than twelve months”.¹⁴ The president of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in Ireland, Seamus Dooley, criticised Irish journalists for often basing their articles solely on statements made, frequently in an anonymous manner, by representatives of the Gardaí or the Department of Justice, without questioning the declarations which were sometimes tainted by prejudices held by civil servants, politicians and the police.¹⁵

Negative political discourse

Instead of trying to contribute some clarity to the debate that ensued, a number of politicians who had a central role in developing policy in this field played to the populist gallery and made the situation worse by making ill-informed and often highly prejudiced statements in public.

The Minister for Justice at the time, John O'Donoghue, regularly declared that most asylum applications were ‘bogus’, before they had even been examined, fuelling the sense that all asylum seekers were dishonest and that their presence in Ireland was suspect. He regularly confused the terms ‘asylum seeker’, ‘refugee’ and ‘illegal immigrant’ in his declarations to the media. An analysis of his use of language during an appearance on *Questions and Answers*, a political debate programme on Irish national television, illustrates how he did this. He started his speech with the following words:

⁹ One article warned people about rapist refugees who were targeting prostitutes and minors. The only source cited was an anonymous Garda. ‘Refugee rapists on the rampage’, *The Irish Star*, 13 June 1997.

¹⁰ ‘Gardaí move on dole fraud day trip “refugees”’, *Irish Independent*, 5 May 1997; ‘Crackdown on 2000 “sponger” refugees’, *Irish Independent*, 7 June 1997.

¹¹ ‘Refugees flooding maternity hospitals’, *Evening Herald*, 25 May 1997.

¹² European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), *Racism and Cultural Diversity in the mass media: an overview of good practices in the EU member states, 1995–2000* (Vienna: EUMC, 2002), p. 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁴ Andy Pollack, *op.cit.*, pp. 33–46.

¹⁵ Seamus Dooley, president of the NUJ, cited in Andy Pollack, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

If a person is deemed to be fleeing from persecution, he or she will receive refugee status [...], but if a person is deemed to be an illegal immigrant, then [...] he or she will be asked to leave.¹⁶

The use of the term ‘illegal immigrant’ to describe someone whose application was turned down as they did not fulfil the criteria laid out in the Geneva Convention only served to reinforce the idea that all those whose applications were rejected were liars or cheats. Later on the same programme, he spoke of the once-off measure, introduced several months previously, which granted asylum seekers the right to work.

On the 26th of July [1999], the government decided that people who were in the State for a year could apply for work permits, even if they were illegal immigrants.¹⁷

He was no doubt referring to those whose application for asylum had not yet been examined, as illegal immigrants had not been included in this measure. Saying that asylum seekers were illegal immigrants until proven otherwise was either a slip of the tongue or a cynical means of convincing the audience that these people were dishonest. Either way, this conflation, coming from the minister responsible for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees, could have a damaging effect on the way these people were perceived by the public. The minister himself spoke of this matter in a parliamentary debate the very next morning, saying:

There is what can only be described as a fog of confusion surrounding the various terms which are used in any discussions about immigration, asylum and related issues. At the heart of this confusion is the failure to distinguish between a refugee, an asylum-seeker and an illegal immigrant.¹⁸

It was crucial, he said, to avoid such confusion:

It is and must be a basic concern of any Minister whose job it is to deal with the problem of public order to ensure that the evils of racism and the violence which have been associated with racism throughout the world are not allowed to take root. [...] We most certainly do not assist the process of integration or help avoid the evils of racism by blurring the legal distinctions which I have already referred to.¹⁹

Thus, he was acknowledging that words such as those he had used the previous evening on television could have negative consequences.

Ivor Callely, a North Dublin TD and chairperson of the Eastern Health Board (which was responsible for the reception of most asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland at the time) also received significant media coverage for his stand on asylum seekers. He called for what he described as ‘rogue’ asylum seekers to be kicked out of Ireland, as they were ‘carrying on in a culture that is not akin to Irish culture’, begging and ‘bleeding lambs in the back garden’.²⁰ Kerry TD Michael Healy-Rae referred to asylum seekers as ‘freeloaders, blackguards and hoodlums’.²¹ Such hostile comments, coming from national politicians were not helpful as they contributed to a general climate of public antagonism towards asylum seekers, in particular at a time when they were being dispersed around the country.

Clogheen

¹⁶ he Minister of Justice, John O’Donoghue on *Questions and Answers*, RTE 1 television, 22 November 1999.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Speech by the Minister of Justice in the Dáil during a debate about a motion of no confidence proposed against him by the Labour party, 23 November 1999. *Dáil Éireann Debate*, Vol. 511, p. 548.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 553.

²⁰ Quoted in ‘High-profile performer for FF in a competitive constituency’, *Irish Times* 20 November 1999.

²¹ Michael Healy-Rae, cited in Frank McNally, ‘Healy-Rae defends son on “hoodlum” asylum seekers’, *Irish Times*, 18 April 2000.

Clogheen received substantial media coverage in the spring of 2000 because of the villagers' hostile reaction to the planned arrival of a group of asylum seekers. I decided to visit the village one year later to learn about the events as they were experienced by the inhabitants themselves and to see how the presence of the asylum seekers was viewed once things had settled down and the media had moved on. My point of contact was the local priest, Father David McGuinness, whose name had been cited in many reports as the person who had become a mediator between the villagers and the DASS at the time. He began by giving me a detailed account of what had happened and explained how, even a year after the events, everyone in the village was extremely wary of speaking to outsiders about the matter. They felt that the situation in Clogheen had been portrayed in a very negative manner in the media, and that certain individuals had been publicly humiliated by some reports. However, the villagers trusted Father McGuinness, and he was therefore able to introduce me to people who had been active in the campaign against the planned accommodation centre. Once it had been established that I was not a journalist, they agreed to be interviewed, although some of them wished to remain anonymous. I spent three days there, and I met and interviewed people who had been involved directly in the campaign, as well as spoke informally, in my bed and breakfast accommodation and in the local pub in the evenings, to other villagers. While my focus was on the attitudes of the villagers themselves, I had hoped to visit the asylum seekers' accommodation centre and speak to the residents to see how they were settling into Clogheen, but my request to do so was turned down by the centre's managers.

The 400 inhabitants of Clogheen in Co. Tipperary learned of the planned arrival of a group of asylum seekers from Father McGuinness. On Thursday 20 April 2000, an official from the DASS in Dublin phoned the priest to announce the arrival on the following Tuesday, 25 April, of forty asylum seekers who were going to be put up in a former hotel in the main street of the village. They asked him 'to get the ball rolling' and to coordinate things on the ground.²² The DASS did not inform the local elected officials, social services, doctor or school, all of whom would have important contact with the new arrivals. The piecemeal approach and the lack of information on the part of the authorities in Dublin was made obvious when they also advised him to get the local TD, Michael Ferris, involved, apparently unaware that he had died a few weeks previously.

At mass on Saturday evening (Easter weekend), the priest announced the news to his parishioners and called a meeting for the following evening, which was attended by several hundred people. The meeting was a heated one. A woman was applauded when she asked if the asylum seekers had criminal records, if they were rapists, paedophiles or murderers. Others wondered if they were carriers of infectious diseases. One parent threatened to remove his children from the local school if the children of asylum seekers were enrolled there.²³ A local politician proposed that Clogheen would accept only ten asylum seekers, instead of the forty announced, but the villagers decided to oppose any attempt to accommodate asylum seekers in Clogheen. The 'Justice for Clogheen' committee was formed and inhabitants voted to place a picket on the hotel until the DASS withdrew their plans to transform it into an accommodation centre.

²² The information about events in Clogheen, unless otherwise indicated, comes from interviews carried out during a visit to Clogheen on 14–16 February 2001, during which I met Father McGuinness; Dick Keating and Marie Murphy, two members of a local committee called 'Justice for Clogheen', which later became 'Clogheen Asylum Seekers Support Group' (thus evolving from a protest committee to a reception committee); PJ English, a staunch opponent to the arrival of the asylum seekers, who refused to be part of the reformed committee; and other inhabitants of the village, who did not wish to be named.

²³ 'Tipperary locals oppose locating asylum seekers in their village', *Irish Times*, 25 April 2000.

Father McGuinness contacted the DASS on Monday morning and suggested that they organise a meeting to inform the villagers of the details of the plan. The officials of the Directorate were obliged to defer the arrival of the asylum seekers, which was planned for the following day. They agreed to come from Dublin for a meeting on Tuesday evening, 25 April, but wanted it to take place in the town of Cahir, about 15 kilometres from Clogheen, as, they explained, the village was hard to find, and the roads in the area were too bad. The priest had to insist that for diplomatic reasons, it was essential that they come and meet the villagers in Clogheen itself.

Several hours before the meeting with the representatives of the Directorate, there was an arson attack on the hotel where the asylum seekers were to stay. Some of the bedrooms were damaged and the hotel was temporarily uninhabitable. The committee condemned the attack, knowing that it would give the village a very negative image, but continued nevertheless to picket the hotel. National press and television converged on the village and the story became front-page news. As a result of the extensive coverage, other towns and villages around the country organised similar pickets of accommodation centres.

During the meeting with the DASS officials, which was attended by television crews and journalists, the inhabitants of Clogheen demanded to know the exact number of asylum seekers, their countries of origin, their cultural and religious backgrounds, whether they were families or single people and whether they had criminal records or diseases. Questions were also asked about the measures put in place for the reception of the asylum seekers. For instance, people enquired whether the local school would get extra support from the Department of Education, whether language classes would be organised or whether the health and social services required would be provided. The officials were unable to give any specific answers, which confirmed people's suspicions that nothing had been planned. The atmosphere deteriorated and more hostile comments were made: one person told the meeting that a woman had been raped by an asylum seeker in a nearby town; another said that asylum seekers in another village had refused medical tests and had spread tuberculosis as a result; it was announced that there were numerous murderers among the asylum seekers.²⁴ Nevertheless, after the hasty departure of the DASS officials,²⁵ and under pressure from Father McGuinness, who refused to yield to what he considered was xenophobic sentiment, the village decided by vote to compromise and to propose to accept a smaller number of asylum seekers – ten or fifteen instead of forty.

Several days later, Dick Keating, the chairperson of the 'Justice for Clogheen' committee, travelled to Dublin to present this proposal to the DASS. Initially, the director, Berenice O'Neill, refused to negotiate on numbers, knowing that the situation in Clogheen was being observed by similar groups all around the country, and that such a compromise might create a precedent. The contract had already been signed with the owner of the hotel, she said, and the DASS could not go back on the arrangement. She suggested nevertheless that the committee could try to negotiate with the owner, Rory O'Brien, to reduce the number of people to be accommodated in his hotel. However, O'Brien initially refused to accept any changes. His hotel had been closed for some time, and according to some people in the village, it did not comply with health and safety standards: the heating did not work, the hot water worked only intermittently. It was in no condition to open to tourists, so the contract with the DASS was a welcome guarantee of a regular income for several years. He offered to donate £3000 to the

²⁴ For a detailed report of the meeting, see Nell McCafferty, 'Ireland of the Welcomes', *Sunday Tribune*, 30 April 2000.

²⁵ Ibid. Nell McCafferty describes how they left before the ritual of tea and sandwiches, to avoid being set upon by the angry villagers.

village school and the local hospital if the villagers went back on their decision to reduce the number of asylum seekers, but his offer was refused. He also proposed the job of manager of the accommodation centre to one of the members of the committee who was most strongly opposed to the project, but the man in question declared at a meeting that he ‘would not sell his soul’.²⁶ Craftsmen who had accepted to do renovation work in the hotel and businesses that were prepared to be its suppliers were threatened with a boycott by some villagers.²⁷ A picket was placed on another hotel belonging to O’Brien in the nearby town of Clonmel.

After three weeks of pickets on the Clogheen hotel, as well as a second fire and several meetings with the committee, the DASS and the hotel owner announced that only fifteen asylum seekers would be sent there. Furthermore, according to several members of the local committee, the Directorate assured them that the fifteen people would be “hand-picked”. The other demands of the committee – an extra teacher for the local school, a translator, a full-time garda in the village and free transport for asylum seekers to enable them to travel to Clonmel where the nearest health services were located – were rejected.

By the time the asylum seekers arrived in May 2000, the ‘Justice for Clogheen’ committee, which had initially opposed their arrival, had decided to rename itself the ‘Clogheen Asylum Seekers Support Group’. The fifteen asylum seekers, which included eight children, arrived one day by bus, unannounced, despite promises from the DASS that the villagers would be notified in advance. A DASS official admitted that this lack of communication was deliberate, justifying it in the following terms: ‘but look who we were dealing with. Clogheen didn’t want anybody’.²⁸ The committee organised a reception to welcome the asylum seekers and coordinated the distribution of numerous gifts of clothes, toys and money sent to the hotel by local residents. During my visit to the village, several people mentioned to me that there was a certain sense of shame at what had happened and a desire to put the past behind them and ensure a warm welcome for the newly arrived asylum seekers.

In the first few months, several families invited them into their homes and organised picnics in the area. English classes were set up by volunteers, and the few children of school-going age made friends with the local children in their class. However, in a village that has one small grocery store and four pubs, but no park, no sports or leisure facilities, there were very few occasions for any real exchange between the two communities once the novelty of initial meetings had worn off. The asylum seekers were not allowed to work²⁹ – a key factor of integration – and had an allowance of £15 a week, which meant they could not go out socially. This led to high levels of depression and boredom in the different centres around the country, particularly in the smaller places like Clogheen, as has been shown by research carried out by

²⁶ Paddy Kenneally, quoted in Nell McCafferty, ‘Clogheen extends hand of friendship’, *Sunday Tribune*, 21 May 2000.

²⁷ A member of the committee who was part of a group of people who issued these threats was removed from his position, as the committee was against such actions.

²⁸ Declan Brennan of the DASS, quoted in Nell McCafferty, ‘Clogheen local: “We didn’t know the refugees would be such lovely people”’, *Sunday Tribune*, 13 August 2000.

²⁹ On 27 July 1999, the government announced that all asylum seekers who were in Ireland for a minimum of 12 months on that date would be granted the right to work. This also applied to those who had sought asylum on or before 26 July 1999, as soon as they crossed the 12-month threshold. However, asylum seekers who arrived after that date did not have the right to work. This situation changed following a Supreme Court ruling in 2017, which found that an absolute ban on the right to seek employment for asylum seekers, where there was no time limit in the decision-making process, was unconstitutional. Under a recent scheme, if a decision on an asylum seeker’s first application for refugee status is pending after nine months, they will be able to apply for permission to work.

the Department of Health.³⁰ Most of the people who arrived in Clogheen in May 2000 succeeded in getting transferred to Cork or Limerick, or simply decided to move back to Dublin, even if this meant they lost their entitlements to accommodation or social welfare allowances. Thus, nobody stayed for very long in Clogheen. During my visit to the village one year after the arrival of the first asylum seekers, local people living on the Main Street, where the hotel is situated, were not sure anymore who was staying in the hotel. Several people said to me that ‘things are going fine. We never see them – they keep a low profile. They’re no trouble’. This type of comment could be construed as meaning that the presence of asylum seekers was acceptable as long as it was not visible, and there was little genuine interaction with the locals.

Tralee

Having studied the reception of the Kosovar refugees in Tralee in 1999, I felt it would be interesting to look at how the town reacted to the arrival of asylum seekers a year later. I spent two days there in January 2001, several months after the arrival of the first group of asylum seekers. During my stay, I visited the Johnson Marina accommodation centre and interviewed the centre’s manageress and several residents. I also met with a Community Welfare Officer (CWO), who agreed to speak to me about her work with the asylum seekers in the centre. Both the manageress and the CWO wished to remain anonymous. At the time, little research was being done about asylum seekers, and as a result, the manageress spoke openly to me about the challenges involved in running the centre, and I was able to sit for several hours in the hotel’s bar and speak freely to the residents. Shortly after my visit, however, a report was published which was extremely critical of conditions in the direct provision centres,³¹ and it became increasingly difficult for researchers or refugee support organisations to visit any of the centres or speak to residents, as staff were instructed to refuse them access.

Unlike Clogheen, Tralee, with its population of 19,000, had a more cosmopolitan tradition, as it was one of Ireland’s leading tourist destinations. Moreover, it had had previous experience of refugees, as it had accommodated 87 of the 1000 Kosovar Programme refugees who came to Ireland in May and June 1999. Programme refugees are those who have been invited to come to Ireland on foot of a government decision in response to humanitarian requests from bodies such as the UNHCR. They do not have to apply for asylum and prove they fled persecution – they are automatically given refugee status and are entitled to work.

At the time, there were two different bodies in charge of refugees: the Refugee Agency, a government body operating under the Department of Foreign Affairs, was responsible for Programme refugees, while the Department of Justice dealt with all other refugees and asylum seekers. The Refugee Agency had developed policies to help the integration of Programme Refugees into Irish society (the Vietnamese in the late 1970s, the Bosnians in the early 1990s, and the Kosovars in 1999). Their approach was more constructive than that of the Department of Justice. They prepared for the arrival of the Kosovars by working in close cooperation with the social and medical services in Tralee, even sending some health workers to the refugee camps to meet the refugees and assess their needs before their arrival³². They held a series of meetings to explain to the local population who the Kosovars were and why they were going to be coming to Ireland, and, once they had arrived, organised social and cultural events where

³⁰ ‘Caring for people from other cultures’, research seminar paper given by P.J. Boyle of the Refugee Health Centre, Parnell Square, Dublin, at Dublin City University, November 2000.

³¹ Fanning, B. and Veale, A., *Beyond the Pale: Asylum Seeking Children and Social Inclusion in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Refugee Council and Combat Poverty Agency, July 2001.

³² Moran, J., *Integrate Waterford: Final Report of Pilot Project 2000-2001*, Waterford, Integrate Waterford, 2001, p. 23.

refugees and locals could meet. The work carried out at the time, as well as the media coverage of the war in Kosovo, meant that there was general goodwill towards the Kosovars during their stay in Tralee. Some subsequently returned to Kosovo, but many chose to stay.³³

As a result of this previous experience, the population of Tralee did not react quite as extremely as in some other places when it was announced in May 2000 that 70 asylum seekers would be sent there. Their main criticism concerned the Directorate's lack of consultation compared with the Refugee Agency, but the fears expressed elsewhere regarding crime and disease, for example, were not quite as prevalent, although some comments were made by a local councillor that Nigerians, being black, would not integrate as well as the Kosovars.³⁴

A reception was organised for the asylum seekers at the town hall on their arrival. The local population welcomed them, and they settled in quite smoothly. Because Tralee is relatively big, many of the asylum seekers were able to get work illegally, which meant that the problem of boredom and lack of money affected fewer of them. The Community Welfare Officers were aware of this situation, but preferred to turn a blind eye to it – some of them even said they thought it was a good thing for them to work.³⁵ English classes were set up by the Kerry Education Service, a voluntary body,³⁶ and social events were organised regularly by different groups from the voluntary sector which had been created at the time of the arrival of the Kosovars. Two local schools organised social evenings where asylum seekers came to talk to parents about their experiences, which led to further exchanges between the two groups. A support group was also established to lobby the Minister for Justice and prevent the deportation of several asylum seekers based in Tralee.³⁷

However, the situation in Tralee was not without its problems. The largest hotel accommodating asylum seekers, with a capacity of 100 people, was bought by the State and run on contract by a catering company, as was the case in many places around the country. The staff of these companies had no obligation to undergo specialised training in order to be able to deal with a very diverse population of asylum seekers or to understand their rights in Irish and international human rights law. The manageress of the Tralee centre admitted to me when interviewed that she had often found herself in difficult situations of conflict, tension or psychological distress, and that she was untrained for the work she was doing.³⁸ Community Welfare Officers were available in town from Monday to Friday from 9am–5pm to deal with any problem that could arise – emergencies involving health and social issues in particular. However, outside of these hours, in the absence of specialised support groups that played a crucial role in Dublin, the manageress found herself faced with problems, particularly psychological ones, that she did not feel competent to deal with. Little thought had been given to the support required by asylum seekers, the primary concern of the Department of Justice at the time having been to get them out of Dublin and into accommodation elsewhere. It is interesting to compare the approach adopted by the DASS and that of the Refugee Agency that was responsible for the Kosovar refugees who arrived in Tralee in 1999. The Kosovar scheme showed a better understanding of the needs of these people. The staff in those centres were

³³ 62 of the 87 in Tralee stayed. In all, of the 1032 Kosovar Programme refugees who came to Ireland in 1999, 140 chose to stay, while 892 returned to Kosovo under the voluntary repatriation scheme. (Source: The Refugee Agency, March 2001)

³⁴ Quoted in Michael Clifford, 'Councillor fears refugees could start Aids outbreak', *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 2000.

³⁵ Interview with a Community Welfare Officer, Tralee, 13 January 2001.

³⁶ There was no State funding for language classes for asylum seekers.

³⁷ Reported in 'Numbers seeking asylum here has fallen by more than a fifth', *Irish Examiner*, 28 March 2001.

³⁸ Interviewed during a visit to the hotel, 13 January 2001. Visits for purposes of research are generally not authorized.

qualified professionals (psychiatric nurses, social workers, etc.) who were available to residents around the clock. While it is true that they were dealing with smaller numbers of people all from the same country, which simplified things considerably, it is also true that those centres were not operating as businesses on a for-profit basis, which was (and still is) the case with the direct provision centres.³⁹

The hotel in which the asylum seekers resided had no garden or outdoor play area for the children. The rooms contained three or four beds, leaving little or no space for tables or chairs, and no suitable place where school-going children could do their homework. The hotel restaurant was closed outside of mealtimes, so the disused bar with its pool table and television was the only place where the 100 residents could spend their days.

The inhabitants of Tralee and the asylum seekers coexisted peacefully overall, but when the DASS announced in 2001 that a further 500 places were being made available in the local army barracks, people began to protest, saying that Tralee had ‘done its share’ for asylum seekers.

Analysis of the introduction of dispersal

Lack of consultation

The cooperation of the population was essential to ensure the success of the dispersal of asylum seekers, but the management of this policy by the authorities, and in particular by the DASS, was open to criticism. As one politician commented: ‘there is no better way to cultivate uncertainty and insecurity, to generate concern and fear, than to withhold information and refuse any opportunity for consultation or negotiation’.⁴⁰ The Minister of Justice, in response to this criticism, assured parliament that ‘it is the policy of the Directorate to make contact with the relevant service providers, such as health boards, prior to accommodating asylum seekers in a given locality’.⁴¹ However, this did not happen in Clogheen, or in Tralee, or in most other locations around the country.⁴² If the reception of asylum seekers was better organised in Tralee, it was largely thanks to groups who had worked previously with the Refugee Agency and understood the importance of communicating with the local population to avoid any hostility. The information meetings, the social events where asylum seekers themselves participated actively, rather than activities in the form of good deeds on the part of the population, contributed to creating a more balanced exchange between the inhabitants of Tralee and the asylum seekers. In other locations around the country, any positive interaction between the local population and the asylum seekers was largely due to the work of individuals or small groups of people who got involved in helping to welcome and integrate asylum seekers, in the absence of any such intervention by the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) or other government agencies.

The chairperson of the Irish Refugee Council, Peter O’Mahony, while in favour of dispersal, criticised the overall lack of consultation:

³⁹ See footnote 5 above.

⁴⁰ Teresa Ahearn, TD for Tipperary and member of the opposition, during a parliamentary debate, 10 May 2000. *Dail Éireann Debate*, Vol. 516, No. 6, p. 1371.

⁴¹ Minister of Justice, John O’Donoghue, in a written answer to a parliamentary question, 10 May 2000. *Ibid*, 1603.

⁴² For Cork, see Barry Roche, ‘Council “not told” of asylum seekers arrival’, *Irish Times*, 6 January 2000; for Athlone, see Sean McConnell, ‘Locals call for more liaison over asylum seekers’, *Irish Times*, 4 May 2000; for Portlaoise, see ‘Anger at plan for housing asylum seekers’, *Irish Times*, 23 November 2000.

It is clear that the consultation was too little, too late, and maybe that arises from the fact that there hasn't been a general culture of consultation in the Department of Justice.⁴³

The DASS justified itself by explaining that it was dealing with a crisis and had no time to spend consulting people. However, several years later, in 2005 when the crisis had passed, the RIA, the body which had replaced the DASS, was still not giving advance notification before dispersing asylum seekers, as evidenced by a statement made by a member of a refugee support group in Galway, describing how the RIA announced the arrival of asylum seekers:

[the man from RIA] said 'they're on the bus, as I speak'. So he rang me the day that the people were arriving, to see would we be able to offer some support, and that was the first I heard of it.⁴⁴

The response from an RIA official to this criticism speaks volumes about the culture of the Department of Justice, of which the RIA is part:

If you go to the community initially, there's all sorts of opposition being vocalised and voiced about it, and the politicians get involved in it, and everybody wants something done, but not in their back yard, you know, it's that kind of scenario, so that leads us to the position where we have to just go and get stuff, and, you know, get it up and running pretty much before anybody kind of knows anything about it.⁴⁵

As the Irish Refugee Council said, 'there is a huge gap in information for communities, and this, combined with even a little prejudice from a small number, is a lethal cocktail'.⁴⁶ This cocktail was very much present at many meetings in towns and villages across the country in the first months of 2000.

Choice of destinations

The government was urgently seeking to accommodate asylum seekers outside Dublin, and in view of the shortage of offers, it agreed to lease certain accommodation centres without even inspecting them, as was the case in Clogheen.⁴⁷ Owners were required to declare on their honour that their buildings complied with health and safety regulations. When deciding on dispersal, the authorities took into account primarily the capacity of the accommodation, without considering whether it was suitable for purpose. Thus the hotel in Clogheen, a small ten-bedroomed facility, was designated for 40 people in a village of 400 inhabitants with inadequate infrastructures and facilities⁴⁸, and without access to the necessary services.

The Minister of Justice admitted that at the time that almost all accommodation proposed to the Department was accepted to avoid a situation where asylum seekers were sleeping in the streets or parks of Dublin. However, he said he hoped in the long term

⁴³ Peter O'Mahony, quoted in Nuala Haughey, 'Concern mounts over dispersal policy', Irish Times, 27 April 2000.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Hans-Olaf Pieper et al, *The Impact of Direct Provision Accommodation for Asylum Seekers on Organisation and Delivery of Local Health and Social Care Services* (Galway, Department of General Practice NUIG, 2009), p. 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Nuala Haughey, op.cit.

⁴⁷ Source: Local TD Teresa Ahearn, during a parliamentary debate, 10 May 2000. *Dail Éireann Debate*, Vol. 516, No. 6, p. 1371.

⁴⁸ At the end of 1999, Clogheen was one of four Tipperary towns/villages short-listed to receive strategic development aid from the County Council. Much to the disappointment of the inhabitants, their application was unsuccessful, and the reason given by the adjudicating panel was that the village lacked infrastructures (sanitation, etc.). Several months later, in interviews with me, some villagers expressed resentment that the plans by the DASS to increase the population of the village by 10% flew in the face of this situation.

to achieve a fair and balanced distribution of asylum seekers throughout the country and to have particular regard, among other factors, to the size of the local communities when deciding the number of asylum seekers to be placed in them.⁴⁹

However, asylum seekers continue to be sent to remote destinations around the country today,⁵⁰ to accommodation centres located in relatively small communities,⁵¹ which are not provided with the necessary resources and support from the authorities in Dublin.

While the agency is called the Reception and Integration Agency, it has a very narrow view of its role. According to its website, ‘(t)he Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) is responsible for the procurement and overall administration of State-provided accommodation and ancillary services for applicants for international protection and suspected victims of human trafficking’.⁵² There is no mention of any remit in the area of integration. As Leonie Kerins, Director of Doras Luimní, an asylum rights NGO, puts it, ‘that’s how they see their role, bricks and mortar. The particular needs of asylum seekers are not taken into consideration’.⁵³ Their integration into these towns and villages is not considered part of the RIA’s responsibility.⁵⁴

The divide between Dublin and the rest of Ireland

The controversy around the dispersal of asylum seekers revealed to an extent the divide between Dublin and the rest of the country. Much of the anger in local communities was at the manner in which the asylum seekers were dispersed. On a deeper level, they resented how government departments in Dublin treated them. As the editorial of the Tipperary newspaper, *The Nationalist*, said at the height of the Clogheen crisis:

(Local residents of Clogheen) have been unfairly labelled as racists. They are part of a rural Ireland which believes it has been treated contemptuously and neglected by successive governments, and which feels that the Celtic Tiger is a mythical animal which lives and thrives in Dublin, but certainly hasn’t reached places like South Tipperary. What have the authorities done for this Ireland, except close down its post offices, banks, Garda stations and schools?⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Minister for Justice, John O’Donoghue, during a parliamentary debate, 10 May 2000. *Dail Éireann Debate*, Vol. 516, No. 6, p. 1372.

⁵⁰ For example, a direct provision centre in the town of Merville, on the Inishowen peninsula in Co. Donegal, is scheduled to open at the end of 2018. Residents of this centre will need to travel to Dublin for asylum interviews and case hearings. The quickest route to Dublin is through Northern Ireland, but under international protection rules, asylum seekers are prohibited from leaving the jurisdiction while their applications for asylum are being examined. They will therefore have to take an indirect route via Sligo, a journey that will take them eight hours. Source: Kathy Donaghy, ‘We’re being sold a pup and our good nature exploited’, *Irish Independent*, 25 November 2018.

⁵¹ As of December 2018, three new direct provision centres are planned. While the centre in Wicklow town (100 asylum seekers in a town of over 10,000 people) is close to Dublin and the number of asylum seekers proportionately low, the other two are in Merville, Co. Donegal (100 asylum seekers in a town of 1,400 people) and Rooskey, Co. Leitrim (80 asylum seekers in a village of 564 people).

⁵² RIA website, available at <http://www.ria.gov.ie/> (accessed 28 December 2018).

⁵³ Quoted in John Grayson, *Deaths in the Direct Provision system in Ireland*, Institute of Race Relations (UK), 6 December 2017. Available at <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/deaths-in-the-direct-provision-system-in-ireland/> (accessed 28 December 2018).

⁵⁴ In 2007, the responsibility for integration was given to the Integration Unit of the Office of the Minister for Integration, then in 2011 to the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI). However, the OPMI’s website describes its mission as ‘the promotion of the integration of legal immigrants into Irish society’. It is responsible for the Refugee Resettlement Programme, but not for asylum seekers. <http://www.integration.ie/en/isee/pages/aboutus> (accessed 29 December 2018).

⁵⁵ Editorial of *The Nationalist*, 6 May 2000.

The divide between Dublin and the rest of the country was very apparent on this issue. There was a tendency among the middle-class urban population to label these rural communities as unsophisticated. However, these communities resented this portrayal of them, particularly considering the fact that the residents of middle-class areas of Dublin were themselves opposing the arrival of asylum seekers, albeit in a more sophisticated manner: by mounting High Court challenges to proposals to open accommodation centres in their area on the basis that they contravened planning laws.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The dispersal of asylum seekers was an emergency response to a crisis, but the crisis was largely the result of the lack of organisation on the part of government bodies in charge of the reception of asylum seekers on their arrival in Dublin and the delay in processing asylum applications. The government, however, insisted that the problems had arisen due to the large numbers of people arriving in Ireland and asking for international protection under false pretences in order to stay in the country and take advantage of its general social welfare system.

Almost two decades after the introduction of the dispersal and direct provision system, problems still arise whenever the RIA announces the opening of new accommodation centres. In November 2018, there was an arson attack on a hotel in the Donegal town of Moville, which was earmarked for the accommodation of 100 asylum seekers. While many local people were horrified at the attack and organised a meeting to show their support for the asylum seekers, the fire broke out after a meeting in the town the previous week, where people had complained about the lack of information from the RIA about its plans.⁵⁷ The health services and the local schools had been given no information to help them to prepare for these new arrivals.⁵⁸ In the same month, in Wicklow town, the announcement that the only hotel in the town was to be turned into a direct provision centre drew hostile reactions from the local population. There were angry exchanges at a public meeting, when people in attendance questioned why individuals from countries where there were no wars, like Nigeria and Pakistan, needed international protection. Fears were expressed for the safety of women in the town and concerning a possible rise in crime, and one person said that people coming from countries with such different cultures would never integrate.⁵⁹ A few weeks later, in January 2019, there was another arson attack, this time at the Shannon Key West hotel in Rooskey, Co. Leitrim, which was about to open as a direct provision centre for 80 asylum seekers.⁶⁰

The hostile reaction provoked by the arrival of asylum seekers in towns and villages throughout Ireland in 2000 is being repeated today. This has partly been a consequence of the policy and discourse of successive governments and of the Department of Justice over the past two decades. Their attitude has had a significant influence on public opinion and reinforced opposition to the arrival of asylum seekers everywhere. Although government ministers have

⁵⁶ See 'D4 residents go to court over "unwanted elements"', *Sunday Tribune* 16 April 2000, and Mary Carolan, 'Ballsbridge reception centre challenged', *Irish Times* 13 February 2001.

⁵⁷ Stephen Maguire, 'Donegal hotel earmarked for asylum seekers set on fire', *Irish Times*, 25 November 2018.

⁵⁸ Kathy Donaghy, 'We're being sold a pup and our good nature exploited', *Irish Independent*, 25 November 2018.

⁵⁹ Niall Colbert, 'Hundreds Attend Meeting To Oppose Wicklow Direct Provision Centre', Today FM News, 21 November 2018. Available at <https://www.todayfm.com/News/Hundreds-Attend-Meeting-To-Oppose-Wicklow-Direct-Provision-Centre> (accessed 9 December 2018). See also 'Angry exchanges at Wicklow Meeting to discuss Grand Hotel for Asylum Seekers', Emerald Isle blog, 21 November 2018. Available at <http://www.thetricolour.com/Articles/183/politics/Angry-exchanges-at-Wicklow-Meeting-to-discuss-Grand-Hotel-for-Asylum-Seekers/14513444/> (accessed 9 December 2018).

⁶⁰ Aoife Moore, 'Minister "greatly concerned" about fire at proposed centre for asylum seekers', *Irish Independent*, 11 January 2019.

made official speeches, when deemed necessary, about the dangers of racism and the need to welcome foreigners into the country, governments have done little to support these statements. Their discourse portrays asylum seekers as a burden to be shared by the whole country, with every town and village having to take in a certain number of them. The way in which government agencies prepare the dispersal of these people in deepest secrecy, without informing the social services locally, suggests that they are undesirable. Furthermore, once the asylum seekers are dispersed from Dublin, the authorities abdicate their responsibilities, providing little support to the local social and health services, the schools and the population to help them look after these new arrivals and integrate them into the community.

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